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SUBJECT: ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS NOT CLASH OF  
CIVILIZATIONS

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. The UN Alliance of Civilizations High-Level Group presented its final report on November 13 in Istanbul to UNSYG Annan as well as the Turkish and Spanish Prime Ministers. The report focuses on political developments, rather than religious or cultural differences, as a primary cause of tension between Western and Muslim societies, specifically citing the Israel-Palestinian conflict and its radicalizing impact across a broad spectrum of observers.

¶2. (SBU) The UN Alliance of Civilizations High Level Group was convened by UNSYG Annan in September 2005 to produce a report on the root causes of tension between Western and Muslim societies as well as an action plan for addressing those problems. The report focuses on three "Western policies affecting Muslim countries" as well as three "trends in Muslim society" as politically-based root causes of conflict. The report's overarching criticism of the West is that it tolerates a status quo that is unfair and demeaning to Muslims. The West is taken to task for the Israeli-Palestinian issue with the report noting that it "remains one of the gravest threats to international stability." Western military operations in Muslim countries (Iraq, Afghanistan) are blamed for contributing to a growing climate of fear and animosity and helping swell the ranks of terrorist groups. The report also accuses the West of applying a double standard in international law and the protection of human rights that increases resentment and a sense of vulnerability among Muslims, as manifested in the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

¶3. (SBU) The report acknowledges that foreign interference is not the sole cause of the problems facing much of the Muslim world today. It notes that an internal struggle between progressive and regressive forces across a range of social and political issues has generated deep divisions within those societies and has in some cases led to extremism and violence. It decries religious figures who advocate narrow, distorted interpretations of Islamic teachings and misrepresent as religious requirements cultural traditions such as honor killings, corporal punishment and suppression of women. Finally, the report notes that resistance to reform and political repression have deprived many Muslim countries of economic and social progress.

¶4. (SBU) The report makes seven principal recommendations:  
--Seek a settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on the establishment of two fully sovereign and independent states.  
--Develop a White Paper to objectively review past successes

and failures and establish the conditions needed to resolve this crisis.

--Convene an international conference to reinvigorate the Middle East peace process.

--Permit peaceful political groups, whether religious or secular, to fully participate in politics throughout the Muslim world.

--Political and religious leaders should promote understanding among cultures and mutual respect of religious belief and traditions.

--Appoint a High Representative.

--Establish a Forum for the Alliance of Civilizations under UN auspices.

The report also makes a series of recommendations in the fields of media, education, youth and migration designed to widen understanding of critical issues, defuse tensions among communities and increase cross-cultural understanding.

15. (SBU) The report was front page news in all major newspapers on November 14, with essentially straightforward summaries of the report and the Alliance's recommendations translated into Turkish. Underlying tensions emerged, however, at an evening event at the Consul General's residence in honor of both Rabbi Arthur Schneier, a member of the Alliance, and a visiting delegation from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (CIRF). Schneier's description of the Alliance's purpose as demonstrating that there was no clash between Christian and Muslim civilizations was applauded. CIRF Commissioner Michael Cromartie's description of the CIRF's "mission" to various countries to look at religious freedom generated an aggressive response from one U.S. educated guest who pointedly suggested that the CIRF should perhaps examine the United States before looking overseas, a remark seconded by others in the audience. At this point a young NGO leader chimed in somewhat sarcastically noting that it was funny that a country with "no problems" like Turkey was always reforming its laws. Finally a South American Alliance member

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was prompted to challenge Turkey's sense of itself as a truly tolerant and open nation by welcoming the Pope warmly thus demonstrating to the West that the 'Muslim East' also welcomed Christians as 'Christian Europe' had welcomed its Muslim community.

16. (SBU) The Alliance member and several European observers later told us they were very disappointed in Erdogan's failure to mention the upcoming Papal visit to Turkey in his remarks at the press conference following the Alliance's presentation of its report. Characterizing it as "hostile avoidance" they criticized Erdogan's planned absence during the Papal visit as well as his failure to explain his absence and to express his regret at missing the visit during his remarks at the press conference.

JONES